

Leadership Plateaus, Passages, and Breakthroughs

skills and values that indicate leadership levels and progress

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Leadership development is a deliberate process of acquiring leadership character and skill through coaching, apprenticeship, and personal reflection. The goal is to lead effectively and develop additional leaders along the way.

The definition above sounds simple and obvious, but leadership growth is sometimes complex, involving a set of technical, relational, spiritual, and strategic competencies that take time, effort, and conscientious awareness to acquire. The following model does not address all the issues of leadership by a long shot, but is intended to increase mindfulness of some of the plateaus and threshold points along the way, and if attended to, may lead to breakthroughs.

The process as it is described below should be received with some caution and qualifications.

First, these “passages” may imply that it is necessary for every leader to continue to proceed from one level to the next. This, however, is not always necessary or desired. *The point is to know where you are, how you need to grow, and to be at a level that is appropriate for what you are trying to accomplish.* Most leaders work in an organizational setting of some kind, but not everyone, so the passages and skills have to be contextualized. This discussion is designed to provoke conversations and support around how we as leaders, whether in a company, a church or other kind of organization, can be better at what we do.

Second, usually the initial levels must be acquired to attain to the latter ones, but sometimes there are exceptions to this as some lessons are missed along the way and have to be learned or re-learned. *Certainly, the foundational starting point of “leading self” must be continually nurtured and is always the key leverage point for all proceeding levels.*

Third, and this is the most challenging side of leadership growth – the current plateau must be mastered and yet, counterintuitively, left behind, or at least held very lightly, to experience the next one (with the exception of *leading self*, which is always in play). In other words, the set of behaviors that worked at the existing level often undermine the leader at the next.

So, the point is to honestly evaluate oneself, along with others who know you and work with you, and reflect on these questions:

- “Which passage or plateau best describes me?”
- “Is this where I want to be?”
- “Should I be at the next, or another, level?”
- or “How can I be more effective and healthier at the level I’m at?”

Leading Self (LS)

To “lead” oneself implies that one belongs to a community of leaders and learners, and embraces a set of disciplines that bring order, direction, and purpose to one’s life. It suggests a long-term view of one’s responsibility to self, family, and others. Leading Self (LS) assumes leadership aspiration and desire, along with the necessary motivation and discipline to see a long course of action to the end. At this stage, one has mastered individual skills and

developed technical or creative talents that are recognized by others as valuable contributions to the team or organization. LS suggests qualities and values such as humility, curiosity, initiative, and empathy that potentially lead to new skill and capability development. A strong sense of self coupled with a sense of humor about oneself is an important indicator of emotional maturity. A written plan for personal development which indicates direction and calling is a key starting point and perpetual check-point for leaders all along the way. An important character issue for the aspiring leader is to simply be a supportive and enthusiastic follower. Responsiveness to leadership is a requisite for leadership.

Plateau: Am I internally motivated, compassionate, teachable, and disciplined person? Have I experienced the satisfaction of being an individual contributor to the team? Am I a good follower who serves my leader with joy?

Passage: Do I have followers? If so, how does this change my relationship to these friends and colleagues?

Breakthrough to LO: I am more aware of the nature of my relationships and the responsibility I have to provide support and direction to those who look to me.

Leading Others (LO)

The first step toward genuine leadership is to embody, in the context of a community, core values – integrity, trust, and love. Leadership begins with simply being what others aspire to be. It is less a set of personality traits and more a set of character traits. Leading Others (LO) at this stage is not a positional role, necessarily, but the establishment of relational trust, where followers are inspired, encouraged and prepared for their steps in life. This level is informal, with few expectations for task accomplishment, and characterized by familiarity and friendship. The leader is learning and appreciating other cultures and different ways of being in the world, caring for group members, and developing sensitivity to what others aspire to and need.

Plateau: Am I able to build relationships, establish trust, and take responsibility for others?

Passage: I am feeling some anxiety when there is task work and delegation involved in my relationships? How does this affect my friendships?

Breakthrough to LSO: I am able to have open conversations about expectations between me and followers regarding our friendship and our shared goals?

Leading a Simple Organization (LSO)

“Organization” at this stage does not necessarily indicate an official or formal organization, but simply that work and tasks are organized in a group where there is a designated leader. The key skills are delegation, creating a sense of community among the members, and getting work done while not eroding individual motivation. This level of leadership is characterized by a one-to-one relationship of the leader with each member of the group and the oversight of their task(s). The leader oversees a “work group” (not necessarily a cohesive team) which means the followers relate primarily to the leader, the decision-making is primarily with the leader, and the leader defines and evaluates the work with a job description. The key transition from Leading Others (LO) to Leading a Simple Organization (LSO) is that now the leader is managing not just the relationships, but also task execution and some basic group dynamics. At this level, the group is based on simple addition of members as they relate to the single leader, and addition of tasks is in direct ratio to the number of followers of the single leader. The members of this group are followers, as they themselves do not have a group they are leading.

Plateau: Am I able to accomplish work with others while maintaining good relationships with them?

Passage: I am feeling the need to lead more and to be less “hands on?” I am uneasy about feeling less control. Sometimes the quality of the work suffers because I am not doing it myself, or I am not managing it as closely.

Breakthrough to LLT: I am making a fundamental decision to select followers who I envision as leaders and to work through them to develop others? I am receiving coaching or consultation from a more experienced leader.

Leading Leaders of Teams (LLT)

This is a strategic and difficult transition. It is the most significant passage, resulting in organizational continuity, personal development, and leadership succession. The skills at this stage are much more complex and the transition feels more emotionally demanding and mentally counterintuitive than previous “turns.” *This stage requires new skills, values, and self-concept.*

Work at this level is accomplished *through* others, and the values of the leader must shift from juggling the roles of individual contributor as leader of self (LS) and manager at the leading a simple organization (LSO) level, to now focusing almost exclusively on *working through others and leading others toward making this shift as well*. The focus is on developing other leaders who, in turn, are developing others, to be emotionally and organizationally capable. The emotional transition here is significant because one's value and success up to this point has been doing things directly, getting work done, and producing results as an individual contributor and/or manager. Now, the leader's satisfaction must come from the development of people, their accomplishments and especially, their leadership journey. This requires patience, coaching skill, and a shift in self-concept (from individual contributor to leader of leaders).

Leading Leaders of Teams (LLT) is a transition from mere delegation to person-development, which requires the leader to select team members who can accomplish the designated tasks but also can work with the other members of the team cross-functionally, expanding their range of expertise to create an integrated team of performers. This requires the leader to not only choose potentially competent team members, but to also blend them with the other members of the team. Leadership development at this stage consists of members working with all the members of the team, not just the designated leader. The leader *leads the members as a team*, not just individuals in the group. The group performs together, works through conflict together, and rotates key leadership functions among the members.

At this level, followers are expected to become leaders, so the leader is choosing members with this expectation in mind. This expectation fundamentally changes the goal of the group from mere task completion and "good group chemistry," to leader development and deployment. The tasks and the good chemistry are still necessary, but they are a means to a more long-term and purposeful end. This requires the leader to pivot her focus from direct work (delegation of tasks and care of individuals) to indirect work (development of leaders and their teams). This is a shift from "managing for efficiency" to "leading for multiplication." It is leading with the goal of scaling the organization to expansion while maintaining alignment and broad leadership expertise.

Plateau: Am I able to select, develop, and empower leaders who, in turn, select, develop and empower leaders of teams to accomplish shared goals?

Passage: I am feeling the need to get “outside” perspective on the organization and develop shadowing relationships with leaders who are leading larger and more complex organizations? I am feeling the need to shift my skills to more conceptual, strategic, and long-term planning?

Breakthrough to LCO: All the members of my team are capable of leading the team, I see potential areas of growth and innovation for our organization’s future, and I have mentors in larger, more complex organizations. I have received consultation from objective sources outside the organization.

Leading a Complex Organization (LCO)

Leading at this level necessitates another shift in perspective and values. This level requires a leader to oversee, not only the development of high-capacity leaders, but to sustain a visionary and strategic perspective. The Leader of a Complex Organization (LCO) must be conceptually adept at seeing the parts of the organization, how they interrelate with each other, and how each of them relates to and impacts the whole. This is more than increasing organizational proficiency, but discerning new opportunities with a long-term perspective. The leader has relinquished managing the parts of the organization at this stage and is now shaping the values, culture, and long-term vision of the entire organization. She is also perceiving the need for change in the organization early, so it can be strategically managed.

Leading a Complex Organization (LCO) requires an understanding of the external environment, which is to say, the larger organizational context in which the organization functions: the spiritual, technological, political, social, economic, and environmental setting. This also entails the ability of the leadership team to articulate its own organizational culture and subculture(s) and how it interacts with the broader cultural context in which it is situated. Additionally, the leader must know how the organization is similar to comparable organizations and, especially, how it is distinctive from them, in order to optimally leverage its potential.

The LCO needs a very capable LLT at her right-hand so that she is free to function as visionary, culture shaper, and organization-wide communicator. She must manage financial resources strategically, attend diligently to the “fit”

of each member of the executive team, and be comfortable with receiving analysis and consultancy from outside the organization.

Plateau: Am I able to lead high-capacity leaders, inspire the entire organization with vision, and “see” the organization in its macro-organizational context?

Passage: I am feeling the need to develop a team of potential successors qualified to lead the entire organization.

Breakthrough: I am planning an exit from the organization that ensures its success.

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